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Elgin's Hidden History of Anti-Racist Rebellion: The Black Youth Uprisings of 1967 in Elgin, Illinois



Aug. 4, 1967: Elgin Police stand guard downtown after the second Black Youth uprising

The arrival of the “Contrabands” in Elgin, Illinois 1862

On October 15th 1862, the first black people known as “Contrabands” arrived in Elgin, Illinois by train in two boxcars. They were called “Contrabands” because they had been taken from slave owners in the confederate states of Alabama and Mississippi and either enlisted in the army to fight in the Civil War or put to work elsewhere. Some of the “Contrabands” were escaped ex-slaves who were found by the army. While the exact number varies by source, it is generally agreed that about 110 “Contrabands”, mostly women and children, first arrived in Elgin. A large number of the freed arrivals had been slaves on the Newsome, Oates and Pride plantations located near Cherokee, Franklin County, Alabama. They were allowed to stay the night in the basement of the Kimball House which was once located at the northeast corner of what is now Douglas Ave and North St. Despite a lack of evidence, the Kimball House was rumored to have been a station for the underground railroad.

Slavery opponents close their doors to newly freed arrivals

Soon after the arrival of the “Contrabands”, Elgin’s reputation for being mostly anti-slavery was presented with an opportunity to put words to action. While some were willing to welcome black people into their homes, most people in Elgin angrily refused to open their doors to the newly freed arrivals. It seemed that for many, it was one thing to be against slavery, but to allow black people into their city and homes was taking it too far. A reality emerged in Elgin that had not been considered; being against slavery did not automatically mean being against discrimination of black people. Despite the brave efforts of a few white people who tirelessly insisted on a warm welcoming for the new arrivals, the majority of Elgin remained hostile to the idea. Threats of lynching circulated as many of the same people who opposed slavery became angry by what was perceived to be an illegal “invasion” of their white community.

“The Settlement”

Due to hostility from the majority of Elgin residents, newly freed black people were forced to live in a three-block area which was known as “The Settlement”. The streets that made up “The Settlement” were Fremont, Hickory, Gifford and Ann streets, and housing consisted of rugged shacks. A small swamp located in “The Settlement” was used by the rest of the city as a dump. There were accounts of police brutality and people being tar and feathered in the 20’s in this area by the KKK. The “Contrabands” were forced to remain concentrated in “The Settlement” for over 80 years with very little help from the city, and with little to no improvement in living conditions.

In Elgin for example, many of the big homes were built and occupied by executives of the now closed watch and dairy industries. When the industries left the cities, many of the people left as well. But people didn’t leave only due to closing factories. As rental prices fell, more low-income people, mostly black and brown people, moved into the areas as well which also caused many white people to move away. As the property value declined in Elgin, big homes were cut up into apartments with most being owned by off-site landlords. Boarding houses provided shelter for people who slept in attics and basements. With the wave of gentrification, hundreds of Elgin people, mostly black and brown, lost shelter and were forced to live on the streets where they were then subject to harassment by the Elgin police.

Because the city of Elgin embraced gentrification as a solution to “problem” areas and economic stability, the city gives money to gentrification projects. This includes an average 50,000 from Elgin’s deconversion program, administered by the non-profit Neighborhood Housing Services of Elgin for owners who convert multi-family homes to their original single-family status. The Historic Architectural Rehabilitation program also gives out an average 10,000 in grants to gentrifying investors.

The criminalizing of people of color in Elgin has been rising as gentrification grips neighborhoods, and the police are quick to respond to any disturbance that could upset the new big-spender residents. An Elgin police officer lives in each of the remaining low-income areas carrying a beeper and on call.

The war against white supremacy continues

It is evident that gentrification is a process of classism and racism that furthers white supremacy. In Elgin, from the unwelcomed arrival of the “Contrabands” in 1862 to an expressively racist Elgin police force 150 years later, Elgin is no more welcoming and friendly to black (or brown) people than before. From the 1967 black youth uprisings in response to racism and discriminatory housing to the current gentrification that seeks to displace and eliminate what remains of the black and brown low-income communities, it seems that white supremacy has continued its plowing without hesitation. The present-day and historic racism in Elgin serves as a reminder that even a smaller city is no exception to the expansion of gentrification through foundational racism and classism in America. In the echos of the many other hidden small city rebellions across America, once upon a time, the black youth of Elgin made their voices heard with defiance, smoke and fiery rebellion. And as the war against black and brown people of Elgin continues today, it might not be the last rebellion Elgin sees on its streets.

in 2016. The mural titled "American Nocturne" by Elgin artist David Powers, was discovered to be a portion of a photograph of the 1930 Indiana lynching of two black men Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. The man in the mural pointing up towards the left is seen pointing at the two lifeless hanging bodies in the original photograph. Many black Elgin residents were shocked that such a mural was allowed up for display in the first place given the origins of its imagery. The mural was quickly taken down and moved to the Hemmens Center after threats of vandalism and racial tension spread through Elgin. Right before it was taken down somebody had posted a large note on the mural that said "Take This Down Now".

In 2000, a black Elgin police officer Phillip D. Brown filed a federal lawsuit against the city of Elgin and police department citing racist slurs being used by white Elgin police officers including calling black children "chitterling" and gang members "hood niggers". According to the lawsuit, Elgin police officers were also vocal about supporting the KKK. In a photograph that was circulated in the department and online, two Elgin police officers, including Lt. Sean Rafferty can be seen posed in front of a monument in Indiana that makes mention of the Ku Klux Klan and with their hands forming a "K" and said "If you are looking for the Klan, we're right here". This incident was documented along with a laundry list of other things including discrimination towards other black EPD officers and a hostile work environment. In August 2014, Elgin police officer Jason Lentz was fired for comments that glorified the racially motivated murder of Michael Brown on a personal facebook post. Elgin police officer Jason Lentz was soon hired back with back pay, full seniority and his pension intact.

Gentrification war against Elgin residents of color

Elgin, with a history of refusal in welcoming those of non-white, lower class status, developed a new method of preserving whiteness in the community and infrastructure. Starting sometime around 1997 gentrification began materializing itself in the form of evictions, rent price increases and the displacement of people.

"Suburban Pioneers" as they are nicknamed are investors who have been flooding Elgin in pursuit of buying up old 1800's and early 1900's buildings and apartments, evicting the tenants, fixing them up and selling them for almost triple the purchase price. From Elgin to Joliet and from Aurora to Waukegan, they move into old neighborhoods lured in by the low prices and vintage architecture. This same wave of people have been gentrifying Chicago neighborhoods for years. Often, these "pioneers" buy rental properties and through displacing many low-income families and struggling teens, turn them back into expensive single-family homes.

Elgin KKK in the summer of 1921

An Elgin chapter of the Klu Klux Klan began recruiting in the summer of 1921. Their first public appearance was in 1922 at a funeral for a member of one of the Masonic orders. On October 23rd 1921, 16 year old Preston Johnson was the first victim of a Klu Klux Klan attack. With accusations of being romantically involved with a white woman, Preston was tar and feathered in the woods of Wing Park and ordered to leave Elgin or else risk death. In 1922 as few black people attempted to leave "The Settlement" and move into other areas of Elgin, the Klu Klux Klan made it's presence visibly known again with a street rally in front of a new house bought by a black family at 703 Orange St.. The Ku Klux Klan in Elgin created the "Citizens League" which was the political action arm of the KKK responsible for attacks, harassment of black people and influence in municipal and county elections which is said to have given them immunity from many arrests.

More than two hundred Elgin men were said to have been initiated into the Elgin KKK in 1922. Fiery crosses were seen burning at Klan gatherings in open fields. On a February night in 1924 around 70 hooded Klansmen followed a burning cross in a parade up Highland Avenue. They led 2 black men from Chicago who were severely beaten with ropes around their hands and neck and left them tied to stakes in an empty field. The Elgin police department took no action against the Klan.

Elgin police department's affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan

In May 1925, a link between the KKK and the Elgin police was confirmed when Klansmen held a midnight funeral service over the grave of a recently deceased officer. Klansmen in robes led by the Exalted Cyclops, an electrically lighted cross and an American flag, assembled on Bluff City Boulevard and marched to the cemetery. A large semi-circle was formed around the grave and both men and women outsiders surrounded the Klansmen and watched the rites, which started with the hymn of brotherhood. In the years following and during the 50's the Klu Klux Klan were seen in Elgin parades wearing their robes and riding horses.

Tension builds over housing and Elgin's racism

By the late 1950's black people in Elgin were still discriminated against and not allowed in many businesses. Real estate agents discouraged them from moving into white neighborhoods or moving beyond "The Settlement" and even private cemeteries would not accept them for burial.

Newcomers during the 1950's-60's came primarily from rural areas in

southern Illinois, Missouri, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Many found low paying jobs now rejected by white people at the state hospital and the Woodruff & Edwards foundry. During these times black people had money to purchase homes but were denied purchases by sellers. Each time a white seller considered selling a home to a black person outside "The Settlement", he was harassed and threatened with a hanging noose left on his property. Whenever a house was officially sold to black people, the house was badly vandalized.

New arrivals were compelled to live in shacks along the west bank of the Fox River or were crowded together in and around "The Settlement." A trailer park was created in 1953 on the south side of Laurel Street adjacent to Willard Avenue. Individual trailers did not have sewage connections or running water. The only washrooms for about one hundred residents consisted of six toilets, four wash basins, and four showers, and even these limited facilities were often in disrepair. The trailers were in poor condition, and the area which was once swamp land was often flooded. Most of the heads of household could afford better housing but it was not available to them because they were black.

In Elgin, Illinois, a battle would be fought on two parts of the housing problem-the push for an open occupancy ordinance to prohibit racial discrimination in housing sales and rentals, and the erection of public housing for low-income families. The need for decent housing became critical in the '60s with the closing of the Laurel Street camp in 1964, the removal of state hospital employees from quarters on the grounds and the curtailment of housing starts by high interest rates. Although families had been displaced in clearing the site, the land was used for parking lots and government buildings. Enforcing the building code was difficult, if not impossible, because there was "no place to go" for those who would have to vacate the condemned buildings.

The Black Youth of Elgin Revolt

Richard Broadnax, a descendent of the "Contrabands" from Franklin County, Alabama, published this in the Courier-News in the spring of 1967:

"In noting the condition of (the) Negro community, I've concluded that Elgin citizens should be truthfully informed of the dangerous social condition which exists here. Elgin Negroes, as Negroes everywhere, find themselves victims of the white man's double standard of democracy.

As a Negro, I have lived in the poorer section of this city. I am part of a younger generation whose views differ from our ancestors. We've waited one

hundred years for the unfulfilled promise of equality. Lord knows we are tired of waiting. We have been pushed to the wall by the forces of discrimination and can go no further. All over America, the Negro is striking out for freedom, sometimes peacefully and sometimes violently. How will they strike out in Elgin?"

That question was soon answered that following summer. The anger and frustration stemming from the housing problems was amplified by televised news accounts of uprisings in Newark, Detroit and other cities.

The first of the two uprisings during the summer of '67 occurred on the night of July 29th. It began with black youth hurling rocks at a police car at Fremont and Gifford streets. At the same time, gasoline was poured on the street and ignited. A crowd of more than a hundred black youths hurled bricks and other objects at two other police cars that arrived on the scene. When the intersection was eventually cleared after physical confrontation with Elgin police, many of the rebels broke up into smaller groups and headed downtown towards City Hall armed with Molotov cocktails. The black youth took the streets again and fire bombs were also thrown on the night of August 4th causing about \$150,000 in damage. Police from other communities were called in to help the Elgin police department battle the uprisings. Thirteen rebels were arrested. The arrested were said to have been beaten bloody in holding cells and squad cars by Elgin police. In response to this, rebels who were still in the streets fought with police viciously into the early morning of August 5th.

The rebellion was eventually repressed and brought under police control. An emergency curfew was executed and traffic was sealed off in the central business district. Businesses and gas stations were closed while rumors were spread that carloads of armed black people and Black Panther Party members from Chicago were heading toward Elgin to aid the uprising.

The Elgin NAACP denounced the uprisings as a means of achieving social change, and refuted charges of police brutality in the arrest and booking of the rebels. The fire bombings and street rebellion were acknowledged by many as not the work of "outside agitators" nor the opportunist misguidance of "young delinquents", but rather the accumulated anger and frustration stemming from years of poverty, discrimination and institutionalized racism imposed by white supremacy.

Present-day white supremacy in Elgin, Illinois

After 10 years of being displayed in downtown Elgin, a mural which appeared to simply depict a crowd of people with one of them pointing up towards the left, turned out to be something else that created racial tension